

Her Story: A Continuing Struggle to Reach Gender Equity

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“There isn’t a single country in the World, not one, where men and women enjoy equal opportunities. We cannot maintain the illusion that someone else is going to do the job and establish equality with men. We must fight for that freedom.” (Gro Bruntland, U.N. Fourth Conference on Women, Beijing, China, 1995).

“Gender inequality holds back the growth of individuals, the development of countries and the evolution of societies, to the disadvantage of both men and women,” noted the *State of World Population Report 2000*.¹ The report makes an excellent case for placing gender inequality under the spotlight so that it can be seen as one of the most urgent matters that severely affects issues of both human rights and national development. The report makes a clear distinction between “gender issues” and “women’s issues.” It states that “...gender refers to the economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female.”² In other words, it means understanding opportunities and barriers, as well as the impact of change, as they affect both women and men. Universally, women have much less access to society’s resources and opportunities. They seldom have the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes affecting their lives and environment. By limiting the participation and opportunities of half the population, a society severely retards its own progress and development. Mary Robinson, the former U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, wisely noted, “In a society where the rights and potential of women are constrained, no one can be truly free.”

Judging from what we can observe today, this simple truth has not penetrated the consciousness of the world as a whole. And for that we pay a heavy price. What I propose to do in this paper is to examine

some of the Critical Indicators of Gender Inequity (IGI) and their impact on societal progress and national development. The indicators I have selected to illustrate this point are the following:

- The Gender Population Ratio
- Fetal and Infant Mortality
- Nutrition and Health Care
- Access to Education
- Access to Special Opportunities
- Professional Opportunities
- Ownership of Property
- Division of Labor, and
- Participation in Public Policy Decisions.

Let us examine each of these select indicators briefly.

The Gender Population Ratio. It is a biological fact that, left to natural forces, the ratio of men to women in a population is about 1:1.05. Even though more baby boys than baby girls are born, more girls than boys survive. The reason, very simply stated, is that girls have the advantage of being made up of a mosaic of cells due to the presence of two X chromosomes, allowing the genes on one or the other of the X chromosomes to be active in a given cell. In boys, however, there is only one X chromosome, since the other is a Y chromosome. The cells that make up boys are thus homogenous. The mosaic nature of girls gives them the advantage of added resistance to infections and thus an edge for better survival. The result is that in a natural population, not only is the ratio of women to men slightly higher, but the life expectancy for women is also slightly more than that for men. When we look at the demographic profiles of countries in Africa, South Asia, the Middle East and China, however, we find that they indicate more men than women in their populations. For example, China, India and Pakistan all report less than 95 women per 100 men. To understand this anomaly, we must examine the next indicator.

Fetal and Infant Mortality. The countries reporting a lower ratio of women to men also show an obvious preference for boys over girls. The alleged reasons are many. They include a societal belief that girls are a burden to the family due to the need for dowry and other expenses. Further, boys are the ones to carry the family name and heritage, the designated inheritors of power and authority, and are considered the economic security of the family. Because of these reasons and beliefs, countries with unnatural population ratios are known to practice sex-selective abortion using currently available medical technologies, such as the sonogram and chromosome typing. The same countries also report, again contrary to natural tendencies, a higher mortality rate for infant girls. There is ample evidence that female infanticide is not uncommon in these parts of the world. Statistics show, for example, that in several states in India, a girl is 30 to 50% more likely to die between her 1st and 5th birthday than a boy.³

Nutrition and Health Care. Undernourishment of girls is a common phenomenon. Globally, girls are three times more likely to suffer malnutrition than boys. Inadequate nutrition and pediatric care are often the result of pervasive cultural attitudes that feature girls as less desirable than boys. Malnourished girls grow up to become malnourished women. They are often stunted and ill-equipped to handle the demands of childbearing, putting them at much higher risk for complications in pregnancy, even fatal ones. Their infants are likely to be of Low Birth-Weight and/or suffer Intra-Uterine Growth Retardation.

The cycle of malnutrition and stunting are repeated if the infant is a girl. Worldwide over 500,000 women die every year as a result of pregnancy- and childbirth-related complications, over 95% in developing countries.⁴ Maternal malnutrition, for example, has been suggested as a possible contributing factor to the high prevalence of cardiovascular diseases, experienced by both men and women, in South Asia. Thus maternal health is critical for the health of the population as a whole. Moreover, female malnutrition early in life reduces learning potential, increases reproductive and maternal health risks, and lowers productivity in general. A recent report, *Making the Grade on Women's Health*, shows that in the United States not a single state met the basic federal goals as set forth in *Healthy People 2010* for women's health care. Indeed, the nation as a whole fails, with the exception of two areas

(mammograms and dental check-ups) out of a possible 27 health status benchmarks, which include screening for diseases, as well as treating them. Thus the United States receives an overall grade of “Unsatisfactory” for women’s health care.⁵ As Judy Waxman, NWLC Vice President for Health, commented, “State policy makers’ piecemeal approach to our health care crisis has resulted in a complex and ineffective system that fails to meet the health care needs of women.”⁶

Access to Education. At the World Education Forum, Dakar, 2000, all countries pledged to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005. Currently, 57% of the approximately 104 million children not in school are girls. Of the estimated 860 million illiterate adults, two-thirds are women.⁷ In the least-developed countries, 40% of the children who enroll in primary school do not complete five years, the minimum required for basic literacy. Only 14% of the girls from primary school enroll in secondary school. Why is education important? Educating girls helps save lives and improve health. According to UNICEF, compared to women who have some post-primary schooling, women with no education are five times more likely to lack basic information about HIV/AIDS. We know that at this time, education is the only available effective “vaccine” against HIV/AIDS. In Brazil, the average family size for women with secondary education is 2.5 children, compared to 6.5 children for women with no education. The effect of female education on fertility is significantly stronger than the effect of male education. Seven or more years of education has a dramatic effect on when sex is initiated by girls before the age of eighteen, both in developed and developing countries.⁸

In developing countries, some 82 million girls now between the ages of 10 and 17 will marry, disrupting their education and limiting their lifetime opportunities.⁹ One in every 10 births worldwide occurs to mothers who are in this age group. Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading killers of teenage girls in the developing world. Young mothers 10-14 years of age have a maternal mortality rate five times higher than for women who are 20-24 years old. A girl who goes to school and stays there has a much better chance to marry later, have fewer children, raise healthier children, and is more likely to send her own children, including girls, to school. Education is the cornerstone for overall development.

Education is imperative for expanding one's horizons, for entrepreneurship, and to move away from dependency. In India, the stellar example for education is Kerala. Kerala has made schooling universal. As a result almost 100% of the girls between 6 and 14 years of age attend school. The 2001 Census of India declared Kerala 100% literate.¹⁰ Kerala did not accomplish this by being rich. In fact, it is an economically poor state compared to Punjab, for example. It is the only state willing to certify its products free of child labor. It is the only state in India that has consistently recorded a higher proportion of women to men in its population (1:1.06 as compared to 1:0.87 for Punjab and 1:0.93 for India). Kerala has the lowest infant mortality rate of 14, as opposed to 67/1000 live births for India. As well, it has the lowest fertility rate (1.7) and the highest life expectancy (75 years). Half a century ago, India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, appealed to Indian citizens to work on ending "poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity."¹¹ He wanted India to become economically self-reliant. Writing about Kerala in *The Atlantic Monthly* article entitled "Poor but Prosperous," Akash Kapur noted, "Kerala suggests an alternative — one that not only emphasizes economic growth but also recognizes the importance of an equitable distribution of resources, an open-minded socially engaged population, and a certain degree of enlightened governance."¹² Education can be seen as the golden key for improving the status of women. It has an impact on everything from health to child and family well-being, economic productivity and development, environmental security and, in turn, overall social and national welfare. It is summarized in the words of the Algerian Muslim reformist Ibn Badis, who observed, "Educate a boy and you educate one person. Educate a girl and you educate a nation."

Access to Special Opportunities. Even today, there is some evidence of gender bias in access to specialized areas of higher education and professional training. This is not uncommon even in the so called "developed countries." In Europe, Japan and North America women have had to work hard to break into professions that are regarded as suitable only for men. Examples are select areas of specialty in science, mathematics, engineering, medicine and business, to name a few. Thirty years ago, we passed Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to ensure equal opportunity in education for all women and girls. A

year ago, more than 200 scientists, mathematicians and engineers wrote to the Secretary of Education, pointing to the “persistent under-representation of women in the important fields of math, engineering and the hard sciences” and asking for an investigation to remedy this disparity.¹³ The silence of the response they received speaks volumes!

Professional Opportunities. There is ample evidence for gender inequity at the higher levels of institutions, such as corporations, universities, legislatures and other governing bodies, the judiciary and international organizations. Even today there are very few women, for example, among university presidents or CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. Recent Congressional testimony by Robert E. Robertson, Director of Education, Workforce and Income Security Issues, discussed that in the year 2000, women in management lost ground compared to men in the same industries and earned less money than they did in 1995.

The ten industries examined in the testimony employ 71% of the women workers and 73% of the women managers in the United States. The report found that, although women make up 46.5% of the work force, they represent only 12% of all corporate officers. Currently, due to the “gender wage gap,” women overall earn only 72.8% as much as men for comparative work.¹⁴ Catalyst, an organization that works to advance women in business, in its report on *The Bottom Line: Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity*, noted the group of companies with the highest representation of women on their senior management teams had a 35% higher return on equity (ROE) and 34% higher total return to shareholders (TRS) than companies with the lowest representation of women. In other words, corporate performance seems to greatly benefit by having a higher representation of women on their leadership teams.¹⁵ Turning to academia, a “Salary Survey” conducted by the American Association of University Professors indicates that women professors earn about 12.5% less in salary than their male counterparts.¹⁶ In universities as a whole, women who have reached the rank of Full Professor are also relatively scarce. A Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) report on the *Status of Women Faculty* showed that MIT, along with eight other top universities, suffered from pervasive gender discrimination.¹⁷ The issues that negatively impact women faculty members include: inequities of resources, lack

of access to leadership roles, exclusion from high-level decision-making processes, and disparity in compensation. The representation of women in the judiciary ranges from few to none, depending on the country in question. As well, women in senior-level positions on international bodies are also few and far between. A major reason for this disparity is that national governments are most commonly responsible for nominating candidates to serve on such bodies. In the words of the late Hon. Patsy Mink, “Discrimination against women in higher education is one of the most damaging forms of prejudice in our nation, for it deprives a high proportion of our people of the opportunity for equal employment and equal participation in national leadership.”¹⁸

Ownership of Property. In almost all parts of the world property is inherited on the basis of laws set up in a patriarchal social structure. This gives men enormous power and authority to make decisions concerning inheritance. Laws that favor men for property inheritance are the norm in most countries. In some parts of the world, women have absolutely no claim to property and cannot legally make any decisions affecting property rights. Women’s inability to claim basic assets, such as homes and land, is due to the absence of legal claims that allow women to own property. The consequence of such laws is women’s chronic economic dependency. It literally keeps them in restraints, vastly limiting their ability to do anything on their own. It makes any entrepreneurial effort hugely difficult, which in turn affects their social worth and standing. Securing bank loans, mortgages and other mechanisms that would help them to become entrepreneurs becomes almost impossible. The lack of economic power lessens their standing in society and reduces their ability to manipulate social support systems.

Division of Labor. With all the progress we have made, household duties and childcare largely remain a woman’s responsibility. It is true that there are many enlightened households where men share these burdens, but that is by no means the norm. In many developing countries, women do most of the work related to agriculture, fetching water, and, of course, all work related to the home, such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children. The work that they do is mostly unpaid labor, and is generally not taken into account in assessing the Gross Domestic Product and other national economic

measures. These vital female contributions to all national economies are typically categorized as non-market activity—that is, non-productive activity. For example, women farmers are responsible for 60 to 80% of the food production in developing countries but have little or no rights over the land they work on because they are women. Women make up 51% of the agricultural labor force worldwide, but in many countries women's extensive contribution to agricultural output goes mostly unrecorded.¹⁹

Participation in Public Policy Decisions. Worldwide, women have little or no voice in public policy decision-making at the local, regional or national level. Globally, women occupy only about 10% of the parliamentary seats and only 6% of cabinet positions. In the U.S. for example, there are 61 women members of Congress out of 435, and 13 women Senators out of 100. There are 8 women governors and 2 women Supreme Court Justices.²⁰ Women Presidents or Prime Ministers are very rare, and the few that there are, to their credit, are for the most part in developing countries. The United States is thought to be very progressive and often claims to be the leader of the world. Not only has it never had a woman President, but also it has yet to seriously consider a woman for that office!

In many parts of the world, women remain on the fringe of society without any direct voice in decisions affecting their lives and living conditions. In these cases they are completely dependent on their male “guardians” to express their opinions or to take any action. Even in the United States, equal rights for women are **not** guaranteed by the Constitution. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was introduced in Congress in 1923, shortly after women were granted the right to vote. It was finally approved by the U.S. Senate, 49 years later, in March 1972. But as of today, it has not been ratified by the requisite majority—38—of the states. It languishes as an “Unratified Constitutional Amendment!” Only passage of the ERA would ensure women of the United States the **constitutional guarantee** of their rights. Without the ERA, all the gains that women have made during the last decades are subject to the whims of Congress and the courts. This is happening at a time when women make up 51% of the population, or put in another way, when there are 6 million more women than men!

To summarize, gender inequity exists in many forms and at many levels. It is practiced in the developed as well as the developing countries of the world. There is ample evidence that denying the emancipation of women has far-reaching consequences not only for women or nations but also for the world as a whole. To bring about change at the regional, national or global level, it is vital to document and collect good, reliable, timely and easily available gender-disaggregated data to measure progress and to craft appropriate policies toward the goal of achieving true emancipation for women. Policies that are not grounded on sound data can be neither effective nor successful. Therefore, we must invest the needed resources to develop and establish such a data archive.

Let me conclude by recalling the words of the eminent economist and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, who noted, “The changing agency of women is one of the major mediators of economic and social change, and its determination as well as consequences closely relates to many of the central features of the development process. ...Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic, and social participation and leadership of women. This is indeed a crucial aspect of development as freedom.”²¹

We, too, must learn and convince ourselves that without *freedom for all* there can be no societal, national or global progress or development. To deny human rights to half of the world’s population is an exercise that is sure to defeat us all. The quintessential fact remains that we are indeed bound to each other’s lives and destinies. That universal truth can be ignored only at our own peril.

Notes

¹ United Nations Population Fund, *The State of World Population 2000: Lives Together, Worlds Apart: Men and Women in a Time of Change*, 2000. <<http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2000/english/>>. 24 May 2005.

² Ibid.

³ United Nations Population Fund, *The State of World Population 2000: Gender and Health*, 2000. <www.unfpa.org/swp/2000/pdf/english/chapter2.pdf>. 24 May 2004.

⁴ Sadik, Nafis. *Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly: Demographic Change and Sustainable Development*. 10 July 2000.

⁵ National Women's Law Center and Oregon Health & Science University. *Making the Grade on Women's Health: A National State-by-State Report Card*, 2004. <http://www.ohsuwomenshealth.com/news/new_report.html>. 24 May 2004.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ UNESCO, "Why Are Girls Still Held Back?," *Gender and Education for All The Leap to Equality: Global Monitoring Report* New York, 2003/4. <http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=24152&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html>.

⁸ The Alan Guttmacher Institute. *Risks and Realities of Early Childbearing Worldwide*. Washington D.C., 1997. <<http://www.agi-usa.org/pubs/ib10.html#summarypoints>>.

⁹ The Child Survival Partnership, UNICEF, 2004.

¹⁰ Census of India, 2001. <nic.in/es200102/chapt2002/Chap106.pdf+census+india+2001+kerala+literacy&hl=en&start=2>.

¹¹ Nehru, Jawaharlal. *A Tryst with Destiny: Speech on the Granting of Indian Independence*. 14 August 1947. <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1947nehru1.html>>.

¹² Narayanan, Ram. "Kerala: Poor But Prosperous." *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1998.

¹³ Committee on Women Faculty in the School of Science. "A Study on the Status of Women Faculty in Science at MIT." *The MIT Faculty Newsletter: Special Edition*. March 1999. Vol. XI (4).

¹⁴ Robertson, Robert E. "Women in Management: Analysis of Current Population Data." *Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Government Efficiency, Financial Management, and Intergovernmental Relations, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives*. Washington D.C.: GAO, 2002.

¹⁵ CATALYST. *The Bottom Line: Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity*. New York, 2004. <http://www.catalystwomen.org/knowledge/titles/title.php?page=lead_finperf_04>.

¹⁶ American Association of University Professors. *Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession: Don't Blame Faculty for High Tuition*. Washington D.C., 2004.

¹⁷ *A Study on the Status of Women Faculty in Science at MIT*, MIT Faculty Newsletter, Vol. XI, No. 4, March 1999.

¹⁸ 117 Cong. Rec. 2658 (1971).

¹⁹ Sass, Justine. "Women, Men, and Environmental Change: The Gender Dimensions of Environmental Policies and Programs." *Population Reference Bureau*. 2004.

²⁰ Coats, R. Morris, Gokhan Karahan, and Thomas R. Dalton. *Barriers Facing Women in Competition for Legislative Seats*. 2004.

²¹ Sen, Amartya. *Development As Freedom*. New York: First Anchor Books, 2000.